

# Corporate Hollywood today: an introduction

by Chuck Kleinhans

To introduce this section of *Jump Cut* on the contemporary Hollywood situation, I want to give a bit of context. Consider the following film facts:

- weekend box office has become a standard news item in the mainstream every Monday morning,
- local communities go gaga over the possibility of another film being made in their locale,
- the premiere of a blockbuster is mostly a commercial for downstream revenues and later release windows,
- cultural piracy is endemic and global,
- every year one or two franchise films (such as *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *Harry Potter*, *Transformers*, *Shrek*, etc.) earn more than all the indie films released that year.

It's time to think about Hollywood as an industry.

When we started *Jump Cut* in 1974 with the goal of advancing a radical media analysis, we hoped eventually to incorporate both an institutional and economic analysis of contemporary media along with an emerging, politically-framed discussion of aesthetics and culture. It turned out to be more difficult in practice than in our idealistic dreams. In part this had to do with different approaches to the same object of study. While literary and visual arts could approach and study media arts (though this was still wildly radical within the orthodox traditions of those fields), the aim was to explicate the individual example, not the system that allowed it to come into being.

Mass communications methods had also developed, in which it was common to do large-scale institutional examination of complex systems, but usually with little or no concern for the aesthetic qualities of what was at hand. And within the field of mass communication studies, in the United States in particular, there was a deep split between “administrative” and “critical” approaches. The former (dominant) model assumed that the function of

studying mass communications was to help the existing (monopoly capitalist) system run better, while the latter direction took a much more skeptical view.

Personalities and politics also played a part. Some of the key founders of communication studies in the United States in the 30s and after WW2 sought to justify this new field within a traditional social science framework and gain research funds to support their work by stressing its usefulness. They pushed the administrative model, arguing that their work would help corporations and government build better media systems, in broadcasting in particular, as well as provide well-trained professionals to staff the system. In contrast, the more politically radical, critical approach argued that rather than servicing the existing system and offering only small adjustments, the whole system needed to be regarded as open to question. Critique was needed, especially in the United States, where broadcasting was a for-profit business and regulated only with an eye to maintaining the market, in contrast to European models of state operated public service broadcasting.

The critical side of media studies often employed an institutional analysis (usually framed as a political economy approach). The analysis here tended to be directed at large scale issues of information control: monopolies dominating communications, governmental and corporate control of information (from news to market data), and the shaping of public opinion. Issues of aesthetics, entertainment, audience and reception were ignored or simplified into slogans. At the same time, the critical school often found itself in a minority stance and was combative; it had little room for or reason to ally itself with radical cultural approaches developing elsewhere. In the past, particularly in film studies, different approaches often gathered into antagonistic camps. People interested in the art and craft of film thought they had little or nothing to learn from those doing institutional analysis. Others immersed in economic and industry studies found cultural discussions a distraction. Unfortunately, competition for resources and prestige within universities frequently contributed to such combative relations, and students were swept up into disciplinary posturing.

But over time, the power of an integrated analysis became obvious. Perhaps key was the gradual publication of new scholarly histories of U.S. cinema that analyzed not simply a sequential parade of “great” films decade by decade or auteur by auteur or genre by genre, but actually accounted for the historical and social context, the economic and technological realities of the times, and the cultural impact of movies. These books—such as Thomas Schatz, *Boom and Bust: American Cinema in the 1940s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) and Stephen Prince, *A New Pot of Gold: Hollywood Under the Electronic Rainbow, 1980-1989* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000)—ranged through social history, institutional history, and cinematic history to provide a much richer and nuanced understanding of what was going on in film’s past. Landmark works such as Schatz, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (NY: Pantheon, 1988), explain how the studio system worked in its time; the book has a compelling

precision that changed the basis on which any smart critic would analyze any such period Hollywood film. And Justin Wyatt's analysis of the 70s blockbuster formula, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994) has forever shifted the way film analysts approach contemporary commercial entertainment films.

While some of the walls and separations remain, particularly locally, today there's a new practice of merging aesthetic and economic analysis in studying media. Several new anthologies offer a particularly welcome entrance into the arena. *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method*, ed. Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren (Malden MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009) offers a very broad-ranging survey of the current state and raises questions about various media industries, including film, broadcasting, the web, and new media. Written by leading thinkers in the field, the essays are remarkably well-written, clear, and balanced in presentation. The editors begin with their own rhetorical question: "Does the World Really Need One More Field of Study?" to set up the need for a thorough and integrative approach to the history, theory, and methodologies of media study today. I had the opportunity to use the book as a text when it first came out in a graduate level course at Northwestern, "Production Cultures and Creative Industries." Arguing throughout for cross-disciplinary investigation and a flexible imagination, Holt and Perren make a strong case that we are in a momentous time of transition. Media convergence is shaking up the old institutions, but it also calls for new methods and strategies for investigation.

Focused on a more specific part of the media spectrum, *The Contemporary Hollywood Film Industry*, ed. Paul McDonald and Janet Wasko (Malden MA: Blackwell, 2008) deals with the inherent and inevitable "spillover" of Hollywood into other media: television, video and DVD, video games, and audio soundtrack albums. The book also has a strong dimension in the way it looks at international issues of market domination and resistance around the world as well as adaptation to change and coping strategies. By including chapters on labor, changes in the star system, and intellectual property issues in the volume, the initial survey of conglomerates, financing, distribution and marketing, and exhibition gains depth and richness. The editors' opening framing of the current situation cleverly compares the 1932 release of *The Mummy* (d. Karl Freund) by Universal with release of *The Mummy* (d. Stephen Summers) in 1999 and *The Mummy Returns* (Summers, 2001) as tentpoles for the franchise—which included attractions at Universal Studios theme parks, action figure toys, and marketing connections with Hershey candies as well as international DVD sales. As the editors say, "Once a film becomes a slot in the television schedules, a DVD, a game, a book, a ride, or an action figure, it is difficult to simply say what a phenomenon like *The Mummy* actually is." (p. 5).

*The Contemporary Hollywood Reader*, ed. Toby Miller (NY: Routledge, 2009) collects earlier essays and book chapters to provide a complementary survey that addresses some of the same issues, but the study also broadens

out to consider gender inequality among media writers, ethnic issues in representation, government issues of support for media in trade negotiations as well as copyright law, and international circulation of films. In this, it joins *Global Hollywood 2*, by Toby Miller, Nitin Gavil, John McMurria, Richard Maxwell and Ting Wang (London, British Film Institute Publishing, 2005), a book that masterfully discusses the international scope of the film industry today.

In this time of dynamic transition, as Holt and Perren point out, novelty and uncertainty open new opportunities to rethink and re-examine the media in new ways. Sometimes the results are contentious; often people with well-established research agendas and methods look askance at those who propose new ways of studying emerging developments. And it can be easy to be swept up into the promise of a utopian, or maybe just better, future, and to lose critical perspective, historical memory, and practical reason along the way. Getting too involved in the latest new thing can result in going native and losing judgment. But it's also the case that a solid grounding in critical thought and historical analysis provide a necessary reference point for navigating the changing present, as David Hesmondhalgh argues in *The Cultural Industries* (second edition, Los Angeles: Sage, 2007).

John Caldwell's *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008) approaches the nature of contemporary media making in Los Angeles by combining ethnographic interviews with textual analysis, industry and economic data. Validating the "below the line" workers in the industry as valid sources of information and analysis, as well as the "creatives" and the "suits" in the executive offices, Caldwell reconfigures what we know of how the entertainment system operates and how it produces meaning.

In the swirl of new events and new configurations of power, older categories break down and call for new concepts. Television, thought of for so long as a "national" matter, is remarkably global today, prompting books such as Barbara J. Selznick's *Global Television: Co-Producing Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008) on international co-production, and Michael Curtin's *Playing to the World's Biggest Audience: The Globalization of Chinese Film and TV* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007). And cinema technology, long thought of as a matter of linear engineering progress gradually refining and improving a basic apparatus, appears very differently in studies such as J. P. Telotte's *The Mouse Machine: Disney and Technology* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008) and Barbara Klinger's *Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies, and the Home* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006). The former presents an historical discussion of Disney's relentless innovation culminating in the Pixar connection. Telotte offers not simply a list of engineering changes but a deep reflection on the evolving processes of production organization, narrative storytelling, and the interplay of form and technology in, say, *Toy Story*. The Klinger volume starts with the observation that since the mid-80s most "film" viewing has been

done in the home and she goes on to consider home theatres or DVD "extras" as part of collecting and fandom, repeat viewings, web parodies, and so forth; such a consideration is essential background for the current decline of the DVD and the uptake of streaming media on demand.

Several of the essays we present here were originally given as papers at a fall 2009 conference in Portland, "What Is Film?" organized by Professor Janet Wasko for the University of Oregon. The event brought together industry people and academics that allowed for a more rapid exchange of a "state of the art" discussion of the media landscape in transition. We hope to continue and extend that kind of analysis in future issues of *Jump Cut*.

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